

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A1NEW YORK TIMES
22 February 1986

Spy for China Found Suffocated In Prison, Apparently a Suicide

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, Feb. 21 — Larry Wu-Tai Chin, the retired Central Intelligence Agency analyst convicted of spying for the Chinese for 30 years, was found dead this morning in his jail cell, apparently a suicide, the authorities said.

Stephen Kaftan, superintendent of the Prince William-Manassas Regional Adult Detention Center in suburban Virginia, said that Mr. Chin appeared to have suffocated himself with a brown plastic trash bag. It was sealed with shoe laces taken from a pair of high-top sneakers that Mr. Chin kept in his cell.

Two weeks ago a jury found the 63-year-old Mr. Chin guilty on multiple charges of espionage and tax violations. He had faced two life terms in prison and fines totaling \$3.3 million at his sentencing, which was scheduled for March 17.

Serious Security Breach

Reagan Administration officials have said that Mr. Chin's activities caused a serious security breach. At the trial, he admitted giving the Chinese some of the Government's most highly classified intelligence reports on the Far East.

Mr. Chin testified that he was on a personal "mission" to reconcile China and the United States. He admitted receiving \$180,000 in payments from the Chinese but said this had been done to establish credibility with the Chinese agents.

The case was intensely covered by both the American press, English and

Chinese language, and in Taiwan. Officials of the People's Republic of China denied any connection with Mr. Chin and State Department officials believe the case was not reported in the press there.

Appeared to Be Coping

In the days after his conviction, Mr. Chin spoke with several reporters. He appeared to be coping well with his confinement and was upbeat, suggesting in an interview that his prison cell was better appointed than his room at Yenching University in Peking.

But Homer Chin, his son, said today that he detected troubling signs this week. In a telephone call with his father's attorneys, he said, he suggested

that someone visit his father and speak with him.

"I told them I thought my dad was depressed," he said. "Outwardly, he was saying things were fine, but I realized deep down that he was not doing well. He is someone who doesn't like to burden other people with his problems."

Robert F. Muse, an attorney with the law firm that had handled the case, said he spoke with Larry Chin by telephone on Thursday. "I certainly did not see anything that would have alerted me to despondency or any break from his normal circumstances," said Mr. Muse.

Homer Chin said, however, that his father had begun to talk about his hopes for an appeal of the conviction or a spy exchange that would allow him to be released to the Chinese. In November, when he was arrested, the Federal Bureau of Investigation quoted Mr. Chin as telling agents that he was looking forward to prison as a chance to write his memoirs.

A Chinese-born translator and analyst at the C.I.A., Mr. Chin was different from the others arrested in recent spy cases. The tall, thin man with a gentle manner had been awarded a medal by the C.I.A. for distinguished service. His friends said he had a passion for gambling.

At the trial, prosecutors said that Mr. Chin had led a life of lies. They contended that he began spying for the Chinese in 1952, when he told them about American interviews of Chinese prisoners of war in Korea.

By giving the reports to the Chinese, Mr. Chin said he hoped to aid the elements in the Chinese Government who were eager for warmer relations with the United States. Among the documents he gave the Chinese, he said, was a secret 1970 communication from President Nixon to Congress indicating this country's hopes for new ties with Peking.

Prosecutors say Mr. Chin used the money he received to buy 29 rental properties later worth hundreds of thousands of dollars.

At the trial, evidence was introduced that Mr. Chin had lost \$96,000 gambling at casinos in Las Vegas and that his credit had been cut off at several of these.

Interviews Last Week

Among other evidence used in the case was a detailed diary kept by Mr. Chin that described his meetings with Chinese officials identified by the C.I.A. as vice ministers in People's Republic of China Intelligence Service.

Mr. Chin was being held in the Prince William facility until sentencing. The United States Marshal's Service, which had custody of Mr. Chin, routinely keeps such prisoners in local jails under a contract, according to Stephen Boyle, a spokesman for the service.

Mr. Chin ate breakfast this morning at 6:30 and was found alone in his cell at 8:45 A.M., a bag over his head, Mr. Boyle said. Mr. Kaftan, the superintendent of the jail, said Mr. Chin's cellmate was sleeping in the day room outside the cell.

Mr. Boyle said that Mr. Chin had been interviewed by jail personnel and a psychologist last week because there were some concerns about his mental state. "They thought he had passed whatever period of depression he was in," said Mr. Boyle.

Homer Chin said his father had always been a man who hid his emotions, even from his family. "I've never known him to be depressed," he said. "I realized that when I went to visit him, he seemed very cheerful. That was all a front."

Mr. Chin had three children with his wife, Cathy, who sat in the front row throughout his trial. At the conclusion, when the jury's verdict of guilty on all 17 counts was announced, Mrs. Chin wept uncontrollably.

Mr. Chin showed little remorse for his activities. In the interview he read from a handlettered list of points in Chinese characters. He said that prison was a small price to pay in exchange for improving the lives of one billion Chinese, who benefited from closer relations with the United States.

At the conclusion of the interview Mr. Chin seemed eager to continue the conversation. He turned to a reporter leaving the jail and said, "Maybe we can talk again."